

Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION

A powerful and redemptive novel of love and family, from the bestselling and beloved Anne Lamott.

Rosie Ferguson is seventeen and ready to enjoy the summer before her senior year of high school. She's smart, athletic, and beautiful—everything her mother, Elizabeth, and stepfather, James, hoped she could be.

But as the school year draws to a close, there are disturbing signs that the well-adjusted teenage life Rosie claims to be leading is a sham, and that Elizabeth's hopes for her daughter to remain immune from the world's darker impulses are dashed. Slowly and

painfully, Elizabeth and James are forced to confront the fact that Rosie has been lying to them—and that her deceptions have profound consequences on them all.

Imperfect Birds is Anne Lamott's most honest and heartrending novel, exploring our human quest for connection and salvation as it exposes the traps that life can set for all of us.

"Anne Lamott is a cause for celebration. . . .She is nothing short of miraculous."

—*The New Yorker*

"A wonderful writer."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"There's no one quite like Anne Lamott."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Lamott knows the power of a place. We know where we're going when we open her books, and that alone is a substantial literary pleasure."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

ABOUT ANNE LAMOTT

Anne Lamott is the author of the *New York Times* bestsellers *Grace (Eventually)*,



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Plan B, *Traveling Mercies*, and *Operating Instructions*, as well as seven novels, including *Rosie* and *Crooked Little Heart*. A past recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, she lives in Northern California.

A CONVERSATION WITH ANNE LAMOTT

Q. This is the third time you've written about Elizabeth and Rosie, the fictional mother and daughter at the center of your new novel. Why did you feel moved to return to them now?

These are my favorite characters, Rosie and Elizabeth, Rae, James. I wanted to check back in with them four years later in their lives (though much later in real time) and see how Rosie and Elizabeth were doing as they both neared the moment when she turns 18 years old and is ready to go out on her own. I wanted to see how Elizabeth and James were doing, both in their marriage and with the added strain of living with a teenager who is testing limits. I wanted to see if Elizabeth had been able to stay sober and how Rosie's new independence and challenging behavior were impacting Elizabeth's best efforts at sobriety.

Q. What would you say are the major themes of this novel?

To me, there are three major themes:

First, this novel is about how incredibly hard it is to know and communicate the truth. The great Donald Barthelme said that truth is a hard apple to catch or to throw, and I wanted to explore how deeply into the frightening truth a newly sober Elizabeth was willing and able to go.

Second, I wanted to know whether Elizabeth's desire to get along with Rosie preclude that she keep the evolving truth from her beloved husband, James? Or could she find a way to be loyal to Rosie and the truth?

Third, is Rosie really willing to risk her life in pursuit of the thrilling lie? Is there a path toward independence that doesn't embrace self-destruction or the machete?

Q. How does Rosie, who's an excellent student and athlete and basically a good kid, get involved with drugs?

Lots of kids who are great students and athletes are involved in drugs—we, as a town and a county, have lost so many kids to Ecstasy and Oxycontin, marijuana and alcohol—and it is often the high school stars whom we lose, or almost do. I think there are many factors that have an impact on kids—wealth, societal and peer pressure, just the realities of growing up in dangerous times with atomically strong marijuana and recreational drugs so easily available, parents who are so busy and stressed that they don't notice their child is experimenting or in trouble.

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Q. Why is Elizabeth so unwilling to acknowledge the full extent of Rosie's drug abuse, even though the lies accumulate one by one in a steady drip?

Denial is one of the most powerful forces on earth. Elizabeth loves and admires Rosie so deeply, and Rosie is such an accomplished student and great liar. Elizabeth, who has struggled so mightily with her own issues over the years, so desperately wants Rosie to love and like her that she rationalizes Rosie's behavior, turns a blind eye, does what she can, and hopes for the best.

Q. Elizabeth has her own problems with alcohol and depression. How does this affect her ability to deal with Rosie's drug abuse, both negatively and positively?

Well, she knows what liars alcoholics are, because she is one—and she lied so routinely to James and Rosie. And she grew up with alcoholic parents, so she realizes that her tendency is to not see what is right before her very eyes—that the people she loves are going down the tubes. Children of alcoholics subconsciously agree not to see what is happening, and Elizabeth knows that this makes it doubly hard for her to tell what is really going on with Rosie.

Q. As the novel's narrator, you alternate between Elizabeth's point of view and Rosie's, and you're very sympathetic to teenage angst and rebellion, as well as a mother's concerns. To what extent do you identify with both of these characters?

I totally identify with both of them, and I love them equally, and ache for both of them, and sometimes want to slap them both and say, Wake up!

Q. Rosie's lies eventually lead to Elizabeth keeping secrets from her husband, James, which threatens their relationship. Is this common in the families of druggy teenagers?

Many parents I know have sacrificed their marriages to sustain their addictive need for their child to love them. People let their marriages disintegrate rather than face the facts about how their children are falling away from them.

Q. In what other ways is the teenage drug abuser's illness also a family illness?

In every way. It's the classic problem of the elephant in the living room that no one talks about. It's impossible to get around it, yet families live their lives trying to stay one step ahead of all that elephant poop on the floors.

Q. Is Elizabeth in some way addicted to Rosie? Is that part of the reason it's so difficult for her to lay down the law?

Yes, absolutely. Parents are so addicted to the love of their children. You just cannot bear the thought that you are making your children unhappy with all your rules and consequences. It's intolerable when they hate you. To avoid that, parents will make almost any compromise—and

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live in total denial—to keep their children’s love. For your child to suddenly hug you or smile at you or want to be with you, when you’ve been going through a difficult patch, gives you a new lease on life. It literally is like morphine or cocaine—it feels like heaven. It’s awful.

Q. Elizabeth’s husband and Rosie’s stepfather, James, is a dedicated writer who spends hours trying to get a piece just right, and his family life suffers to some degree as a result. Is this a particular hazard of the writer’s life, or is it common to all parents and spouses with demanding jobs? Is it ever possible to find the perfect balance between work and family? Have you ever been able to achieve it in your own life? Do you agree with Rosie’s assessment that James will ultimately value his family relationships more highly than his success as a writer?

I think James is a great husband and father, but like all good writers, he has a wounded ego and narcissism. I think he does an amazing job loving Elizabeth and Rosie; he’s my favorite male character that I’ve ever worked with.

Q. Do you, like James, borrow things that your family and friends say for your books?

Oh my god, of course. Every writer is a parrot and a thief. I use everything great that everyone says. I am shameless and constantly paying attention, as are all of my favorite writers.

Q. You’ve written in some of your nonfiction about your relationship with your son, Sam, most notably in your bestselling book *Operating Instructions*. You’ve also written about your own experience with addiction and recovery. Is *Imperfect Birds* in any sense autobiographical, about Sam or about you?

No, it’s not autobiographical in the sense that you mean. I definitely relied on my own teenage experiences with drugs and alcohol to try to understand where Rosie was, although course I was a teenager in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, so the specific drugs were different. But the experiences I’ve had with many different young people over the years helped me to see the truth in Elizabeth’s and Rosie’s lives. I interviewed a number of teenage girls, all of whom were highly successful students and athletes, all of whom got seriously into trouble with drugs and alcohol, and in some cases, needed to be sent to rehab.

Sam is now an extraordinarily loving and successful young man, but boy oh boy, there were bad patches. He was invaluable to the writing of this book, in his ability to express how exasperating and suffocating my anxieties were, and my efforts to control his behavior.

Q. On a national level, how widespread is drug and alcohol abuse among teenagers? How much of it is truly serious?

It’s a devastating problem in all parts of the country. Huge. Just look at all the kids and grown children of our most famous actors, musicians, writers, politicians, who had the greatest

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opportunities and in many cases, role models, who still succumbed to the endless temptation to mood-alter, to feel more powerful, to feel less shame or anxiety through chemical means. Innumerable children lost to overdose, suicide, institutionalization, car accidents, countless lives destroyed at every single layer of society. Or, by the same token, just look at all the people in your extended family, whose kids have gotten caught up in drugs, alcohol, gangs—everyone knows many families with lost kids.

Q. In your own experience, how widespread are teenage drug and alcohol problems among the children of your neighbors and friends in the San Francisco Bay area?

Huge.

Q. What are the best places for the parents of teenagers with drug and alcohol problems to turn for help? What are the first steps to take?

I am certainly not an expert, but every region of the country has therapists and psychiatrists who specialize in families with addicted children (or parents). Every area has therapeutic groups for teenagers at risk, involving group therapy, family therapy, one on one—it takes a huge amount of effort and help to break through the barrier of denial, and angry sullen resistant teenagers. My experience is that it takes a community to save or protect a child or teenager—parents who are going through the same thing, or have come through; it takes a lot of truth telling, faith, unbelievable stamina, lots of failure and mistakes and starting over; and in many cases, it takes expert help and maybe 12-step programs.

Q. From a generally liberal parent's point of view, how do you help teenagers grow up and become independent and yet set appropriate boundaries for them?

I needed a lot of help—the guidance of parents whose kids had been exposed or involved with typical scary teenage behavior, who could help me set boundaries, rein my child in even though it meant he would be furious with me; and who totally convinced me that the secret to healthy child-rearing is massive love, strict boundaries, and consequences, consequences, consequences.

Q. One of the fundamental questions that Elizabeth wrestles with is whether there is such a thing as evil, aside from the depravity of human beings. What do you think?

I do believe in evil, in the same way that Rae does, who basically shares the same spiritual beliefs as me—that there is a force of great goodness and divine Love and Mind, and that there are also forces of almost supernatural malevolence, which is how I feel about the drug cartels and drug dealers that prey on the vulnerable and innocent, for profit.

Q. In your nonfiction, you have written a great deal about your struggles with the challenges of religious faith, but you always remain firmly rooted in your identity as a person of faith.

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But Elizabeth does not believe in God, although her best friend does. Why did you choose to make Elizabeth an agnostic? Would Elizabeth's difficulties with Rosie have been any easier if she were religious?

I don't know how to explain this except that I just came to know that Elizabeth does not really believe in God. She believes in caring and compassion, in a generous spirit as the source of our fullness and joy. She believes in an ecumenical life-spirit of sweetness and loyalty and truth—but not in a God, or godhead, or anything official like that. However, the tiny speck of Something that she connects to in the miserable sweat lodge is amazing to me, so touching and unexpected—a vague and skeptical sense of a higher power.

Q. What's going to happen to Rosie? Is there any way for you or anyone else to know?

I have no idea, although we see her come a very great distance, and we see her strong, fierce, tender nature; and we know that she is deeply loved by adults and peers who are all also trying to heal psychologically and spiritually. So maybe with all that going for her, we have reason to believe she will forge ahead through life's hardships with courage and passion and her sense of humor, to whatever awaits her.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you interpret the opening sentence of the book, "There are so many evils that pull on our children?"
2. In the opening pages of the novel, Elizabeth is aware of the questionable behavior of the teenagers in Landsdale, "Rosie was apparently not nearly as awful as many of the town's teenage girls, not by a long shot." She sees the kids in the Parkade, she knows about the abortions the high school girls have had. How does her knowledge of what goes on in Landsdale affect Elizabeth's behavior?
3. Elizabeth says that living with a teenager is like "having a low grade bladder infection. It hurts, but you had to tough it out." Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you remember what it was like to be a teenager? Did you think your parents were totally "loked" the way that Rosie thinks of James and Elizabeth? Why or why not?
4. Are Elizabeth and James good parents? Why or why not?
5. Why did Robert Tobias ask Rosie to give him tennis lessons? Do you think even his asking was inappropriate? That it gave Rosie the wrong idea? Why or why not? Where, if at all, did Mr. Tobias cross the line with Rosie? How have the lines between teacher and student changed since you were in school? Or haven't they?
6. When Elizabeth first found the Valiums in Rosie's jeans, her "stomach dropped" and she told herself there was a reasonable explanation and confronted Rosie. Do you think Elizabeth was right to trust Rosie's explanation, even though she knew what other kids in the town were doing in their spare time? As the novel progresses, Elizabeth often

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- chooses to trust Rosie over her own instincts. How could Elizabeth have acted differently? How much or how little do you think parents should trust their children?
7. In many of her books like *Grace Eventually* and *Plan B*, Anne Lamott gives us an irreverent, but positive look at the role of faith and religion in her life. Elizabeth uses faith as a way to cope with her alcoholism, Rosie's behavior and her own actions. What do you think Anne is trying to say about faith in this book?
 8. What do you think Rosie is getting out of her experimentation with drugs and alcohol? What of her relationship with Fenn? Why do you think Elizabeth and James trust Fenn?
 9. Do you think the rules James and Elizabeth set up after Rosie was arrested were fair? What would you have done differently? Do you think there was a way for Elizabeth and James to discover all that Rosie was keeping from them?
 10. Elizabeth is obsessed with Rosie being open and honest with her and she's terrified of them growing apart. When does this change? And why? When does Elizabeth decide she must let go?
 11. What do you think will happen to James, Rosie, and Elizabeth after Rosie comes back home from the wilderness program?
 12. Do you think it was the right decision to send Rosie to the wilderness program in Utah? How do you think it has changed her? Will it make the lasting impression that Rosie needs to change her behavior for good?